

May, a Continuity, a Renewal

Daniel Guérin

1969

With the exception of that by Cohn-Bendit, what is striking about some of the countless books written a tad too hastily about May '68 is the relative absence of references or insufficient references to the revolutionary past.¹ The books in which this omission can be found were written in general by young people. The young were the initiators of May and feel a legitimate pride in it. Through May, many discovered the Revolution, a Revolution that not all of them knew beforehand from books, or only knew it poorly due to the falsified versions that had been presented to them. From which a strange point of view develops which leads them to believe that in France everything began with May '68, that May was an absolutely original creation without any direct ties to French working-class and revolutionary traditions.

Claude Lefort displayed an illusion of this kind when in an article in *Le Monde*,² he boldly asserted that "with the May movement ... something new is being announced ... an opposition that does not yet know what to call itself, but which challenges the power structure in such a way that it cannot be confused with the movements of the past."

It is true that Lefort in this case was carried away by the ardor of a polemic against the various Trotskyist groups he reproaches, not without reason, with seeking to recuperate and monopolize the May movement at the risk of fossilizing it. But in making his case he exaggeratedly tips the balance in a direction opposite to that of the Trotskyist tradition, and I do not share his opinion that May is so radically different from the movements of the past.

To be sure, what is new, what is absolutely novel in May is that we witnessed the first act of an extended social revolution whose detonator was constituted not by workers, as in the past, but for the first time by students. Nevertheless, this peculiarity of May only concerns the first two weeks of the famous month, when it was the students who built the barricades and held the streets. The second phase of the "May revolution," the far more important one, that which more profoundly shook the political power and the bosses, which gave rise to the alarm of the

¹ *Le Gauchisme, remède à la maladie senile du communisme* (Paris: Seuil, 1969). [In fact, the book—published in English as *Obsolete Communism: The Left-Wing Alternative* (Oakland: AK Press, 2001)—was coauthored by Daniel and his elder brother Gabriel. Daniel was associated with the anarchist group *Noir et Rouge* and was extremely critical of the Anarchist Federation; he became the figurehead of the revolutionary students' movement of May 1968. Gabriel was a member of the French Communist Party, but left it in 1956 and was associated with the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* group around Cornelius Castoriadis, as well as with other libertarian Marxist networks. DB]

² *Le Monde*, April 5, 1969.

property-owning class and the flight of their capital, was a revolution of the working class in the style and at the level of the great social crises of the past.

One wonders whether the reason certain people tend to overestimate the originality of the May revolution is that it arose during a historical stage when the Revolution had been emptied of all content in France; when it had been betrayed, perverted, erased from the map by two powerful political steam-rollers, two sterilizers of critical thinking: Stalinism and Gaullism. If May looked boldly anti-establishment, if it seemed to bring into question all established values and authorities as Claude Lefort seems to think, is it not because Stalinism for the last forty years and Gaullism for the past ten had caused the French to lose the habit of radical contestation, of libertarian protest? A habit, a taste, a tradition that had been theirs for almost 150 years.

Let us take the time to travel into our past and rediscover the countless May '68s of our national and social history.

For my part, scratching and digging behind the misleading facade constructed by bourgeois historians, I attempted to revive the mass movement of the revolution of 1793, extraordinary and unbelievable because it occurred in a France still more or less plunged in the darkness of absolutism, aristocracy, and clericalism. I followed step by step the bold incursions in the direction of the revolutions of the future dared by the sans-culotte vanguard, so far in advance of its time: the practice of direct democracy, the omnipotence of the power of the street. I compared, and how could one not, the Enrages of 1793 and those of 1968 by stressing this phrase of Jacques Roux, precursor of Daniel Cohn-Bendit: "Only the young are capable of the degree of ardor necessary to make a revolution."

When I had to describe the burst of vitality, of good sense, of good humor, more good-natured than cruel, that cast the people into the great adventure of de-Christianization in 1793 and led to the overturning of idols, I gave the chapter dedicated to this subject an expression borrowed from May '68: "All power to the imagination." For what we have here is the same creative genius.

All the social revolutions in France that followed that of 1793 and were born of its traditions were, like their predecessor, an exuberant festival of recovered freedom and an enormous collective release.

To a certain extent that was the case with the general strike in Paris in 1840, at the very moment when the idea of socialism was born in people's minds. This general strike is too little known, for here, too, the bourgeois historians, with the exception of Octave Festy, were no doubt superficial and negligent by design.

And what should we say about the tumultuous, fertile revolution of 1848, which bred so many ideas that emerged over several months from a popular crucible in turmoil, when so many public meetings and vast assemblies of the people were held, when so many newspapers, pamphlets, and tracts were born.

The libertarian explosion that was the Commune of 1871, the direct heir of that of 1793, was of the same kind. It is often hidden from us, or relegated to second place, by authors who have their eyes almost exclusively fixed on its civil war aspects. But during the short span of time when revolutionary Paris was able to blossom during a relative respite before it was subjected to the fatal aggression of the Versaillais, what a flowering, what an overflowing of joy and liberty!

³ This seems to refer to Gatti's experimental play *Les 13 soleils de la rue St. Blaise*, produced by the Theatre de l'Est Parisien. The award-winning poet, dramatist, and filmmaker Annand Gatti was born in 1924, the son of an Italian anarchist, and would take part in the armed resistance to Nazism. After the war he worked as a journalist for many years before he produced his first literary work and directed his first film. [DB]

Armand Gatti, in the beautiful text he wrote in May '68 to comment on the projection of slides on the walls, perfectly grasped the parallels between "May '68" and the Commune.³ Likewise, it would be giving a one-sided vision of the May revolution to reduce it to a series of street battles and to minimize the general contestation and the direct democracy. The confrontation with the CRS was the price that had to be paid to open the festival of freedom at the Sorbonne.⁴

The same libertarian impulse can be found in the great strike that followed the end of World War I in France just fifty years ago, combined with the mutinies of French sailors refusing to go to war with the Russian soviets. Do people know that on June 8, 1919, Toulon was the theater of a genuine insurrection, where sailors, soldiers, and workers fought shoulder to shoulder in the streets, stones in hand, against the gendarmes?⁵

For my part, I was fortunate enough, along with millions of other militants, to live through June '36, the immediate precursor to the workers' May '68. And along with all of them I can testify that France, paralyzed by the general strike and the factory occupations, and with the power of the masses master of the country, was on a par with the workers' uprising we lived through a year ago. Like the preceding explosions, the "revolution" of 1936 was an impressive festival of popular joy. Parades of millions of demonstrators filled the streets, just as on May 13, 1968. And in the factories, of which the workers had become masters, we participated in an immense popular festival, an enormous Bastille Day, one far more spontaneous than the one celebrated every year by the bourgeois republican tradition.⁶

Having participated in many debates in the lecture halls of the occupied university buildings in May, I can attest to the fact that the passionate and vibrant crowds that squeezed into them, far from turning their backs on the revolutionary past, were eager to find a continuity in it, to quench their thirst at that eternal spring of libertarian energy, which many of them had just discovered.

The rebirth of anarchism during May '68 might have seemed surprising. But looked at more closely, the French working class, and by extension the French people, has always retained an anarchist—or rather anarcho-syndicalist—substratum. Contrary to appearances, the CGT's tradition of class struggle and direct action which flourished from 1895 to 1914 never died. Many militants, and even leaders, who have since become Stalinist "Communists," have not completely succeeded in killing within themselves a repressed nostalgia for anarcho-syndicalism. The union split of 1921, the creation of the CGTU and then its Bolshevization did not cause the old syndicalist ferment to vanish from the consciousness of the workers.⁷

The general strikes of 1936 and 1968, both of which were accompanied by a wave of occupations, were spontaneous mass mobilizations of the rank and file, and were authentically anarcho-syndicalist.

⁴ The CRS (Compagnies Republicaine de Securite) are the French riot police, created in 1944. [DB]

⁵ Cf. 'Les Mutineries de la mer Noire', *Les Cahiers de Mai* (July 1969).

⁶ Commonly known in the English-speaking world as Bastille Day, 14 July has been the official French national celebration day since 1880, and marks not only the popular storming of the Bastille fortress, a symbol of absolutist monarchy, on 14 July 1789, but also the 'Festival of Federation' of 14 July 1790, which was organized by the supporters of constitutional monarchy and was intended to promote national unity in order to prevent any rolling back of constitutional changes and any further social conflict leading to more radical reforms. [DB]

⁷ The Confederation Generale du Travail (General Labour Confederation) was the first national trade union organisation in France, and before the First World War was strongly influenced by anarchism, leading to the militant practice dubbed 'revolutionary syndicalism'. Increasingly moderate during and after the Great War, the movement split in the 1920s, with a Communist-dominated minority creating the CGTU (Unitary CGT). [DB]

Despite the maneuvers of counter-revolutionary bureaucrats like Georges Séguy,⁸ the CGT of today in large measure remains, deep in its heart, anarcho-syndicalist, and that is what infuriates the aforementioned individual.

Finally, if anarchism was rediscovered in May, or rather entered into symbiosis with Marxism, there is no need to go far to find the cause: it is quite simply because at the moment that it blooms every social revolution can only be libertarian.

Only afterwards do the recuperators, the leaders who lay their paws on the Revolution, disfigure it and stifle it.

The revolution of May was aware of this danger. Up till now it has not succumbed. But beware!

⁸ Georges Seguy had been a Communist Party (PCF) member since the 1940s and was general secretary of the CGT (which since the Liberation of 1945 had been dominated by the PCF) from 1967 to 1982. [DB]

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